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Welcome! How to Maximize the Appeal of Your Restaurant's Entrance

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Welcome! How to Maximize the Appeal of Your Restaurant's Entrance

Abstract

[Excerpt] Restaurateurs tend to put enormous energy into planning their restaurants' interior and back-of-house spaces, but often treat the outside like an afterthought. This is unfortunate because the exterior of your restaurant is often the customer's only clue about who you are and what kind of experience they can expect before they commit to walking in your front door.

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Comments

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Welcome!

How to Maximize the Appeal of Your Restaurant's Entrance

By Stephani Robson

Restaurateurs tend to put enormous energy into planning their restaurants' interior and back-of-house spaces, but often treat the outside like an afterthought. This is unfortunate because the exterior of your restaurant is often the customer's only clue about who you are and what kind of experience they can expect before they commit to walking in your front door.

It would be great to be able to provide restaurant operators with a simple checklist for creating the optimal restaurant entrance; i.e., provide these kinds of lights, order

this kind of sign, put your entrance exactly so many feet from the left corner of the building.

That's impossible, however, because design is a form of communication and is subject to the same kinds of contextual variation and interpretation as any other conversation between individuals. There is no one design feature that, if adopted, will automatically elicit a particular reaction from your customers; but as is the case in any language, you can convey a particular meaning or message through the design elements you choose to incorporate into your restaurant.



That message is what your customers will pick up, often unconsciously, when they drive by your front door and decide whether to stop in. So what can you do to your entrance to say, “Welcome! You’re going to love us!”?

Where Are Your Customers Coming From?

First, consider how your customers approach your operation. Do they arrive on foot, by car, from the nearest subway station? Each of these factors will influence the design of your entrance. If your concept is in a streetscape where most

of your customers will be walking to your front door, think about from which direction most customers will approach.

Generally, that will be from the direction of your most important sources of demand: offices, major shopping areas, colleges, subways and bus stops. Knowing this, you can position signage and perhaps the entry itself to attract attention at street level. Concepts that attract a drive-by clientele need to consider more prominent entrances to increase visibility and to make it easier for patrons to judge where to park — everyone likes to park as close to the front door as possible.

Is your restaurant a destination or do you try to capture passers-by who have not yet decided on a place to eat? Destination restaurants can afford to be a bit more discreet with the design of the entrance.

Think about the legendary entrances to speakeasies. The very fact that they were unmarked and unassuming made them that much more enticing to those in the know. (Of course, what speakeasies were serving influenced this, as well.) Many high-concept destination restaurants use this same strategy to make their operations seem more upscale or exclusive. In these cases the signage might be small or even nonexistent and the door itself fairly unobtrusive, marked only by a light. If diners are hunting for you and won’t give up until they find you, this approach may be effective, but go this route with caution because if your customers have trouble finding you, they may start looking for more convenient options. Restaurants that rely on impulse visits rather than careful planning should avoid downplaying the entrance.

Does Glass Equal Class?

Should your door be made of glass? It depends. Many restaurant patrons think of glass doors as more downscale, plus these doors need to be kept spotless to set the right tone about your operation. One advantage of using glass is that it allows guests to see inside, which can help encourage them to enter if they can see that your operation is a good fit for their needs. Glass is also helpful for your host, if you have one, so he or she can see guests as they arrive and be ready to greet them. A solid door (generally made of wood) can be either more formal or, if it is heavy and rustic, can suggest a hidden find. Depending on your concept, either message might be just what you intend to convey. No matter what material you end up choosing for your door, make it easy to open by selecting door hardware that is easy to grip and a door that isn’t too heavy for older or much younger patrons. Also make sure your door hardware clearly indicates whether to push or pull the door to open it. It may sound silly, but ambiguous visual cues that result in pulling the door when it should be pushed or vice versa can quickly turn off a potential guest, or at least make them a little irritated. Why start the dining experience on the wrong foot?

Entrance Basics

Define clearly. A good restaurant entrance is easily found and easily understood, which means that customers can readily identify the entrance by day and night. There are several design cues that help define an entrance: awnings and canopies, upright plantings or other décor flanking a doorway, and changes in the depth of the building façade.

Awnings are usually made of fabric pulled over some kind of metal framework, which may or may not be adjustable, whereas a canopy is a more permanent overhang that is suspended from the front of a building. Both shield your entrance from the weather and provide a convenient spot for signage that runs perpendicular to the façade as well as across the front of the overhang. By fitting canopies and awnings with downlights, restaurateurs can also emphasize the entrance to the restaurant at night.

Erecting an awning or canopy may be costly and in some locations may require a permit. An easier and less expensive approach to making your entrance stand out is to put a vertical feature on either side of the entry door. Often shrubs or dwarf trees in planters are used in this way, but you could also use a menu stand, wine barrels filled with concrete blocks, or other solid décor elements that are at least three feet tall. Whatever you choose should be consistent with the restaurant's concept and be heavy enough to dissuade pranksters who might try to remove or tip over the décor. But try to avoid chaining the items down, as this sends the wrong message to your customers.

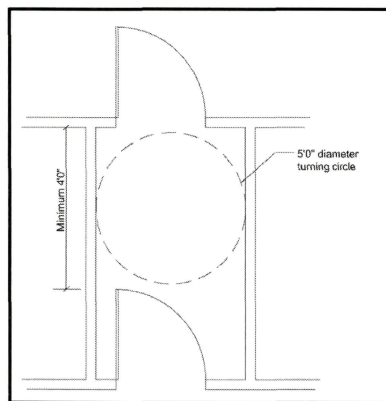
Sometimes the way the door is set into the façade can itself draw attention to a restaurant entry. Recessing the door is a common design trick to make an entrance stand out, as is pushing it out from the façade as part of a vestibule where codes permit. For restaurants on a street corner, consider placing the entry on the corner itself to enhance visibility from both sides of the site. The famous Tour d'Argent Restaurant in Paris has its entry at the junction of two streets, highlighted by a glass and metal canopy mounted strikingly high up the building, making it easily seen from any approach.

The old cliché of “rolling out the red carpet” may not be practical today but the idea of creating a contrasting finish to draw attention to the approach to your restaurant is still valid. Instead of using carpeting out of doors, you can install pavers or interlocking paving bricks to create a distinctive pattern that extends from the sidewalk to your front door. There are also lots of different types of entrance mats available that not only highlight your entry but also help keep your floors clean and dry and reduce the potential for slips and falls.

Design for guest comfort. Many restaurateurs put a lot of thought into how their restaurants look but may drop the ball when it comes to function. The functionality of the entrance is no exception. We tend to think about entrances only in the context of bringing people in, but the entry can affect guests seated nearby throughout their entire dining experience. And a poorly designed entry can cost you a lot of money if the air

you are heating or cooling at great expense is being pulled out of your restaurant every time the door opens or if a blast of cold air hits your guests periodically and shortens their stay or keeps them from coming back.

The most basic approach to controlling the flow of air through your front door is to build a vestibule. Vestibules (also called air locks) are merely two doors mounted in sequence. The spacing of the doors is intended to trap tempered air between the doors so that the warmth or coolness you've worked so hard to create stays inside and the unpleasant air from outside doesn't blast your guests. A common error is to position the doors too close together to get this effect. As you can see from the illustration below, a minimum of four feet between the doors will keep air where it belongs; but to meet the standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act Architectural Guidelines, you'll need a five-foot space clear of any door swings. Some designers will offset the doors to further impede air movement. If you choose to go this route, make sure it is still easy for people of all abilities to navigate the entrance.



In some locations, a temporary vestibule can be erected during particularly hot or cold weather. (You see these structures all over New York City in the winter.) And if your local authorities won't permit temporary structures that take over sidewalk space, you can also hang a heavy pair of curtains

at least four feet inside your entrance to keep winter gusts at bay. Make sure that the curtains are easy to part and can be pulled or tied back to allow clear passage for those using wheelchairs or other mobility aids.

As a final way to keep your guests comfortable, consider how you position tables near the entrance. It's a good idea to separate the host area or arrival space from seating by providing some kind of partition beside the dining table. People feel much more comfortable when they have some kind of architectural anchor on at least one side of their tables, and a low wall can also help prevent any drafts that escape your air lock. This might be a good spot to put a booth with its back toward the entrance so that diners can face out into the dining space rather than at the entrance.

Keeping Up Appearances

To guide you in fine-tuning the design of your entrance, here are some additional factors to consider and

some insights into how your customers may interpret your choices.

Colors. Bright and highly saturated colors are generally associated with casual and “fun” restaurants. Painting your front door a bright, contrasting color may highlight the entry and sets the stage for a more relaxed and casual dining experience. For more formal operations, leaving the natural color of the materials used on the entryway is often considered more upscale and, in the case of natural wood, more welcoming. The color of any awning or canopy should also tie in with your concept. Bold primary and secondary colors suggest a more casual concept, while muted colors are perceived as more formal. Stick with a darker color here, as it looks neater longer than light tones that will need cleaning more often.

Lighting. Lighting seems to be a really crucial clue regarding the quality level of your restaurant. In general, the dimmer and warmer the lighting, the more upscale the restaurant is perceived to be. Uplighting that shines up from planters or concealed fixtures in sidewalks is likewise seen as making a restaurant look more upscale, whereas the use of fluorescent or neon lighting in any form tends to make customers think your restaurant is more casual. Adding extra light at your entrance is another way to make the door stand out and to make it easier for guests to read your menu. (You should always post it outside, by the way. Customers like being able to get a sense of your offerings and your price point before they commit to dining.)

There is evidence that there are cultural differences in how the use of light influences how patrons view your restaurant. In a Swedish study, businesses that used a lot of exterior lighting or left the lights on all night were perceived negatively — consumers didn’t want to patronize a company that wasted so much energy. However, in the United States, lots of light suggests a lively and convivial spot. Whatever amount of lighting you choose, try to select energy-efficient lamps to keep your costs down and to send the message that your operation is sensitive to sustainability issues.

Signage. How you present the restaurant’s name communicates as much if not more than the name itself. As an example, consider these different ways of depicting the same restaurant name:

- A The Shore Café

B THE SHORE CAFÉ

C The Shore Café

of strokes in fonts like Times Roman — are considered more formal than san-serif fonts like Helvetica or Arial. Examples B

Which version seems the most upscale? The least expensive? The easiest to read from a distance? Fonts with serifs — those little flourishes that you see at the ends

and C above both use serifs, but the forms of the letters express a very different feel. Example B seems more formal to most people, partially because of the uniformity of the letter heights and the narrowness of each letter. Thin and tall fonts are viewed as more feminine and refined than fat, heavy fonts. The font used in example C is usually perceived as much more playful and fun, due in part to the curly flourish on each letter. The drawback of this kind of font, however, is that the whimsical curls and letter angles make this signage hard to read from a distance. Save fonts like this for printed materials that guests will hold in their hands. Example A is also challenging to read from a distance because of the similar shape to the lowercase letters: the “O” and the “A” look very much alike.

Signage that mixes too many font styles and colors is viewed as unprofessional. Hiring a graphic designer to help create your signage is money well spent, and there may be some who are willing to work for meals as part of their compensation, saving you valuable cash.

Sign size and location also influence perceptions of your restaurant. Signage size appears to be inversely related to perceived restaurant quality. A small sign is viewed as being more upscale than a large one.

Backlit signs that are flush-mounted to the façade tell customers that you are affordable but not particularly glamorous. Take that same shape and size of sign and light it using overhead fixtures, and immediately your restaurant seems more upscale. Write your restaurant’s name on window glass across your storefront to tell your guests that you are unpretentious and old school; write it only on the door glass if you want to signal that yours is a more refined eatery (or to be even more upscale, put only your logo on the door glass and leave off the name altogether). Centering your sign above your door can suggest either formality or simplicity; signage that is off-center, either aligned with one edge of your storefront or the other, makes your restaurant seem trendier and more upscale.

Neatness Counts

Lastly, keep your entrance looking great at all times by paying close attention to burned-out lights, dead leaves or branches in your planters, out-of-date menus, and general dust and debris that should be swept away daily. If you want to show your affiliation with certain credit card vendors or industry groups, or you’ve won local “best eatery” awards that come with a window sticker, make sure to mount these decals or signs discreetly and evenly. A crooked sticker on your front door, even if it says “One of the City’s Best Bets,” will tell your guests that attention to detail is not your strong point. And that’s never good.

In summary, consider the front door of your restaurant like the front door of your home, which in fact it is. You probably spend more time at the restaurant than you spend in your house, don’t you?

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